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ABSTRACT

Piaget noted that young children cannot think in a logical fashion, objectively, or about hypothetical situations. These limitations of preoperational thinking render the young child dependent upon or bound by perceptions. Overreliance upon perceptions results in children's inability to distinguish fantasy from reality. Young children's unrealistic perceptions give rise to irrational fears of abandonment; attacks by wild animals hiding in closets or under beds; being alone in the dark; and/or witches, ghosts, and dragons. These characteristics of young children's thinking have significance for educators and parents selecting appropriate literature for children under the age of 7. The first challenge for selection is to provide literary experiences that will instill pleasure of reading and help allay irrational fears. The second challenge is to provide related activities (e.g., creative dramatics, role playing, puppetry, and creative writing experiences) to establish a sense of continuity between what is read to the child and what is actually experienced. Selecting appropriate literacy experiences and providing related activities can promote optimal development if children's cognitive capabilities and emotional needs are taken into consideration. Unfortunately, educators often misinterpret, misapply, or ignore Piaget's theory when selecting literature for young children. (RH)

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Selecting Appropriate Literature for the Preschool Child: Life without Fairy Tales

Research Paper

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Selecting Appropriate Literature for the Preschool Child: Life without Fairy Tales

Because young children have not yet reached the point of engaging in logical or operational thought, Jean Piaget used the term preoperational to define the thinking ability of two- to seven-year-olds. Children within this age range are learning to master some symbols (e.g., spoken words) but have difficulty comprehending more abstract symbols (e.g., printed words). In addition, Piaget has noted that young children cannot think in a logical fashion, think objectively, or think about hypothetical situations (Piaget [1924] 1977a, [1927] 1977b; Piaget and Inhelder [1959] 1977c). These limitations of preoperational thinking render the young child dependent upon or bound by his/her perceptions. Furthermore, Piaget explained that this overreliance upon perceptions results in an inability to distinquish fantasy from reality (Piaget 1963).

The fact that young children cannot distinquish fantasy from reality has been acknowledged and confirmed by many researchers (Elkind 1978; Harms 1975; Hersh, Paolitto, and Reimer 1979; Skeen, Brown, and

Osborn 1982). However, many educators and parents erroneously believe that fantasy-type literature is appropriate for young children and that it promotes cognitive, social, and emotional growth.

Since the preoperational child's thinking is prelogical, it is unsystematic and subject to contradictions. It is a style of thinking characterized by egocentrism, animism, and artificialism. This level of thinking prevents a child from viewing the world from any perspective other than his/her own and leads the child to conclude that everyone shares his/her beliefs and desires (i.e., egocentrism). Furthermore, the young child attributes life to inanimate objects believing that they have a "mind of their own" (i.e., animism) and believes that everything that is seen was made by man (i.e., artificialism). Thus, the child concludes that the rock tripped him/her, that trees cry when branches are broken, that the sky is painted blue with a brush, and/or that mountains are built by strong people.

Due to these limitations of preoperational thought, Piaget found that the young child does not perceive reality in an objective manner (Piaget

[1924] 1977a, [1927] 1977b, 1963). Instead, reality consists of whatever is felt, seen, or heard at any given moment since the picture the child obtains is biased by his/her unrealistic perceptions of the world. Furthermore, these unrealistic perceptions of the young child give rise to irrational fears of abandonment; of attacks by wild animals hiding in closets or under beds; of being alone in the dark; and/or of witches, ghosts, and dragons. These characteristics of young children's thinking have great significance for educators and parents in the selection of appropriate literature for young children. Since fantasy-type literature cannot be distinquished as make-believe material and is often interpreted literally by the child, new fears may be created by reading stories to him/her about evil witches, trolls, giants, creatures, and other scary characters. To attempt to explain to the child that his/her fears are illogical and unfounded is a futile and frustrating experience for the adult and the child since the child is governed by what is perceived. Therefore, the first challenge for adults who select literature for children under

the age of seven is to provide literary experiences that will instill pleasures of reading and that will help to allay irrational fears. The literature selected for young children should present a variety of literary genres (e.g., Animal Stories, Poetry, Historical Fiction, Modern Fiction, and Informational books) in an attempt to cultivate positive attitudes towards all kinds of literature. Examples of appropriate books are:

Animal Stories: Make Way for Ducklings (McCloskey 1941) and Kitten for a Day (Keats 1974)

Poetry: May I Bring a Friend? (de Regniers 1964)

Historical Fiction: The Cabin Faced West (Fritz 1960)

Modern Fiction: The Wrong Side of the Bed (Ardizzone 1970), Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel (Burton 1939), and William's Doll (Zolotow 1972)

Informational: Benny's Animals (Selsam 1966), Mothers Can Do Anything (Lasker 1972), and Black is Beautiful (McGovern 1969).

These books and hundreds like them not only build positive attitudes towards books but also help to assure the child that he/she is secure and will be

protected, help to expose him/her to new information, and help to illustrate that other children have experienced his/her situation or problem.

Many children think of books as interesting to look at or to listen to and often have one or two favorites which they want to hear long after they know it by heart. The parent or teacher may be baffled by repeated requests to read the same story, yet the child persists. This repetitive behavior is very common and can illustrate that the child has a need to be able to predict events that are forthcoming, that he/she identifies with the character(s) or the situation, or that he/she simply enjoys that type of book. Adults can use this situation to introduce the child to another book of similar type. For example, suppose the child's favorite book is Bernard Waber's Ira Sleeps Over (1972), which deals with a child's need for familiar objects when spending his first night away from home. A related fictional book would be Joan Lexau's Benjie on His Own (1970), which tells the story of how neighbors help Benjie when his grandmother is ill. Both books are fictional and can help to convey a message of security to

the child.

The second challenge for adults who select literature for young children is to provide related activities (e.g., creative dramatics, role-playing, puppetry, and creative writing experiences) in order to provide the child with continuity between what is read to him/her and what is experienced. Thus, when the preschool classroom's pet canary dies, an appropriate book to read is The Dead Bird (Brown 1958) which tells a story of how children find a dead bird and bury it. After reading the story, the teacher and the children could bury the canary and talk about the book they read, their feelings, etc.

Creative dramatics is a useful activity where the children can pretend they are in the same situation as the character(s) in the story. Inexpensive materials such as cardboard boxes, toilet roll/paper towel holders, adult clothes that no longer fit or that are worn-out, etc. can provide the props needed for most books. Although the children may begin to "act out" the story as it originally occurred, they generally become very creative in inventing new ideas to contribute to the action.

Another activity which is closely related to creative dramatics is role-playing. Role-playing differs from creative dramatics in that it is slightly more structured in format. For example, if the story read to the child was Ask Mr. Bear (Flack 1958), several children would be selected to be the characters in the book. The story is then portrayed by the children in an "off-off-Broadway tradition." The teacher or the parent may assume a character's role or may just play the part of director. In classroom situations, teachers often find themselves having to produce the story four or five times to insure that every child has an opportunity to be a character, provided that time permits.

Puppetry is another activity which can develop from most books read to young children. Since children of the preoperational stage believe so strongly in magic and engage in animistic thinking, puppets usually hold the young child's attention. Puppets allow children who are too shy to role-play an opportunity to perform without being seen. Again, a cardboard box can be used as a puppet stage with puppets made from everything from socks

to paper bags. The production may be structured with lines coming from the story or may allow for creativity by encouraging participants to build upon the plot.

A creative writing experience can also be used as a related activity after reading a book. Depending upon the age of the children, this activity may be written or oral. For instance, in reference to Waber's Ira Sleeps Over, the teacher could ask the children what item they have that they really like. It may be a doll, a stuffed animal, a photo, a book, or even a favorite blanket. The teacher then writes the responses on a large piece of paper, reads it back to them, and may even ask that they bring the item to school. The same activity can be carried out by using a tape recorder since most children enjoy hearing their voice on tape. Depending upon the age of the children, the teacher may also ask the children to draw a picture of a character or a scene that they remember from the story.

As mentioned earlier, Piaget felt that these types of activities provide a bridge between what is heard or seen and what is experienced by young

children. Thus, the story has more meaning for the child than if it were just read to him/her. These activities also give young children opportunities to move from passive listeners to active participants, provide a goal-oriented release of energy, and can foster the idea that books are fun. Other advantages of enacting and building upon stories that are read to young children are that it instills creative and imaginative thought and leads to greater comprehension and longer periods of retainment of material (Pellegrini and Galda 1982).

Selecting appropriate literary experiences and providing related activities can promote optimal development of young children if the child's cognitive capabilities and emotional needs are taken into consideration. Unfortunately in education, Piaget's theory is often misinterpreted, misapplied, or ignored when selecting literature for young children. Thus, this paper has attempted to demonstrate how Piagetian theory can more accurately be put into practice.

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